

L'elisir d'amore, Glyndebourne, Lewes

Reviewed by Jessica Duchon

Tuesday, 14 June 2011

After the mighty Meistersinger that opened the Glyndebourne Festival, Donizetti's L'elisir d'amore could seem a picnic. In this bel canto rom-com, the love triangle of the sassy Adina, her sighing swain Nemorino and a womanising sergeant, Belcore, is transformed by the quack Dr Dulcamara's spurious cure-all potion. Nemorino takes it, grows confident, stops clinging; Adina realises she loved him all along. It's all a good excuse for some dazzling singing – and this revival had two major debuts on offer.

Danielle de Niese was singing her first-ever Adina; and as Nemorino, the young American tenor Stephen Costello was appearing there for the first time. At least, he did on opening night. I caught the second show; Costello was down with a throat infection. Instead, we had the Glyndebourne debut of another exciting young American tenor, Michael Wade Lee.

Annabel Arden's production winds forward the action to provincial Italy in the Mussolini era. This pulls its weight when Nemorino joins the army for instant cash: he'd have to become a blackshirt. The relationship between Adina and Nemorino feels beautifully real, but her on-the-rebound engagement to Belcore – the raffish Russian baritone Rodion Pogossoff – has too little contact to convince.

Musically, though, this is a heady elixir. With de Niese around, not much else matters. She's a natural stage animal, relishing movement besides sound and socking out the glitter of the coquettish heroine's coloratura, the higher and more brilliant the better. At first, Adina totes a rifle and sharpens knives; later,

clad in wedding meringue, her heart opens – and she throws a terrific tantrum, too. De Niese made her intelligent, honest, ultimately compassionate.

Lee radiated easy charm. His voice is a spot-on bel canto tenor: focused, pure and light-timbred, rising to powerful and open-throated top notes; and if "Una furtiva lagrima" started off a teeny bit nervous, the aria soon worked its magic.

Paolo Gavanelli is a marvellously larger-than-life Dulcamara. The chorus was in enthusiastic fettle; and Enrique Mazzola's conducting of the London Philharmonic bounded along with grace and suppleness – though a substantial cut to the final ensemble leads the opera to a too-abrupt conclusion.

To 4 August (01273 813813)